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SUBJECT: PRT ANBAR: PROMINENT ANBARIS SPEAK OUT AGAINST
CANDIDATE BAN

Classified By: OPA Director Greta Holtz for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) This is a PRT Anbar (Ramadi) cable.

12. (C) SUMMARY: In meetings on January 14 and 16 that PRTOffs and representatives of U.S. forces held with prominent Anbari imams and sheikhs, the Anbaris expressed anger at reports that the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) had agreed to decertify nearly 500 candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections. Both groups believed the decertification was a Shi'a sectarian move to disenfranchise Sunnis and was a direct result of influence from the Iranian government. In the eyes of the Anbaris, this event threatens the election's legitimacy. END SUMMARY.

ANBARI CONCERNS ABOUT IHEC DECISION

13. (S) In a January 14 meeting between PRT Team Leader and seven imams from the Sunni Endowment, Sheikh Riyadh, the deputy to Sheikh Abdullah Jalal, the chief of the Sunni Endowment in Anbar, stated that he and many "in the street" felt that the decision by IHEC to deny Mutlaq and 500 other candidates from participation in the upcoming parliamentary elections was part of a broader effort to marginalize Sunnis seeking participation in the central government. The sheikh opined that IHEC was a particular problem, alleging that when it was formed Sunnis had been denied full participation. Riyadh stated that the IHEC was controlled by Shi'a who were loyal to their own political interests, not to the IHEC mission. (NOTE: The IHEC Board of Commissioners is composed of four Shi'a, two Sunni, two Kurds, and one Turkoman. One Shi'a commissioner may not vote because she is the Chief of Electoral Operations. END NOTE.)

14. (C) Sheikh Riyadh and the other imams expressed their full support for the national elections, mentioning several times the fatwa issued requiring Anbari Muslims to vote and making it a sin for them to abstain from the process. Sheikh Riyadh al-Zobayee and Sheikh Abdullah Jalal both stated that they would continue to do all they could to encourage Anbaris to turn out the vote, but said they were now worried about the outcome. Sheikh Abdullah stated that the only way to ensure a fair poll was to have United Nations elections observers in Baghdad ensure the vote was counted correctly.

15. (S) On January 16, PRT and USF representatives met with a council of seven prominent Anbari sheikhs, including Sheikh Ahmed abu Risha, the most politically influential of the sheikhs in Anbar. The IHEC announcement dominated the discussion, with the sheikhs expressing the opinion that Anbaris viewed the IHEC announcement as an unjust assault against their political prospects. According to Sheikh Khamis Abd al-Kareem al-Fahadawi, Provincial Governor Qassim al-Fahadawi's sheikh and close friend, "Article Seven of the constitution says you can be tried for being a Ba'athist. It was put in for specific reasons, but now it is being used as a weapon against us." He went on to describe how unjust he

felt it was that so many of those apparently being barred from participation "gave up their blood in the fight against Al Qaeda."

CONSPIRACY THEORIES ABOUND

¶16. (S) Cited by the sheikhs as evidence of a conspiracy were visits by the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq and the Iranian Foreign Minister with GoI leaders in the days preceding the announcement, and the Iranian incursion in to the Fakka oil field in late December. The sheikhs also restated a rumor they heard that the Iranian ambassador had visited the IHEC before the removal decision was announced. (NOTE: This has Qbefore the removal decision was announced. (NOTE: This has not been substantiated. END NOTE.)

¶17. (S) Sheikh Hamed Rashid al-Alwani remarked to the USF commander that "you are soldiers, and take orders, but the State Department needs to pay attention. Reconciliation is a slogan, but there is no implementation on the ground." All of the attending sheikhs voiced a desire for USF to slow down their withdrawal from Iraq and for the USG to directly intervene in GoI affairs, over fears that Iran was taking control of the country. (COMMENT: The phrase "the State Department needs to listen" was repeated four times during this conversation by two of the sheikhs, and represents a Sunni view that the United States needs to protect Iraqi politics and governance from Iranian interference. END COMMENT.)

¶18. (S) PRT Team Leader and USF commander both spoke at length on the importance of Sunni participation in the vote in order to counteract these perceived negative influences, stressing

the importance of turning out every eligible voter, including women and new voters. Sheikh Ahmed reinforced the Sheikhs' commitment to the vote in spite of their perception that it was being compromised by IHEC's decision. As another sheikh put it, "Sheikh Hamid al-Heiss calls us agents of the United States, but I would rather live under the Americans than under the Iranians." The sheikhs indicated that, although they would support the vote, they remain pessimistic about the future of Iraq and the prospects of change in the next election.

¶19. (C) COMMENT: As in the past, both the sheikhs and imams continue to express a willingness to participate in the political process. However, they clearly fear that the process is being compromised by Iranian influence, and that, with USF withdrawing, they will be left powerless in the face of an Iranian enemy. If the IHEC ban is upheld, there is an increased risk of violence in Anbar in the run-up to the elections, and continued questions about whether the Sunnis will opt out of a national vote for a second time. END COMMENT.

HILL